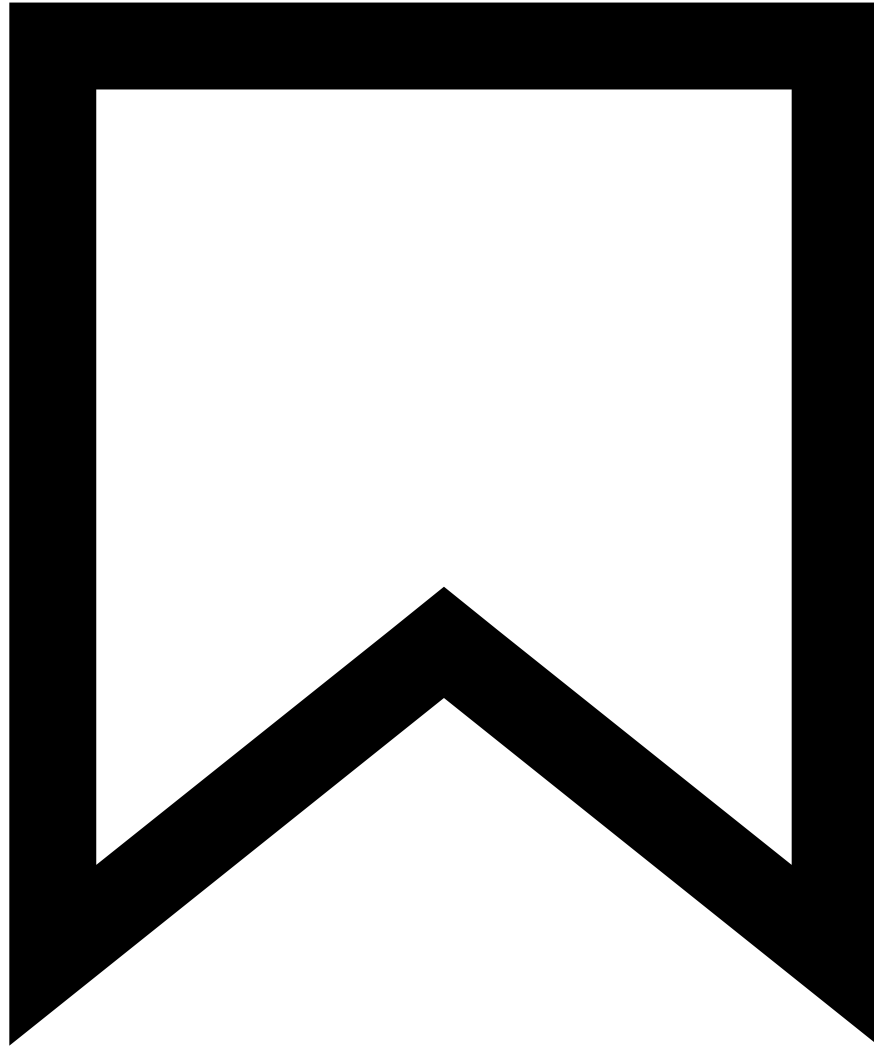


# In N.M. child-care funding win, providers nationwide see road map

[Casey Parks](#) November 10, 2022 at 8:00 a.m. EST



Ivydel Natachu works with 3-year-olds at a preschool in Albuquerque. (Marie-Pier Frigon)



## Save

On Tuesday, New Mexico became the first state in the nation to create a permanent fund for child care. More than 70 percent of New Mexicans agreed to amend the state constitution and spend about \$150 million a year on early learning. The next morning, providers from across the country

gathered on a Zoom call to celebrate.

Many wiped away tears as an advocate relayed the news: The fund would make child care more affordable for hundreds of thousands of families, and workers would finally win the wage increases they'd long needed.

"I'm emotional right now," Ivydel Natachu said. She works with 3-year-olds at a preschool in Albuquerque, and she'd spent years advocating with the nonprofit organization Olé to create the fund. Before the coronavirus pandemic, the 52-year-old earned only \$10 an hour. But the state's leaders had funneled federal relief into temporary raises, and Natachu's pay had risen to \$15 an hour.

"And now I'm starting to save money," she told the group of about 50 providers on the Zoom call. "I'm saving money to buy a house. That's my personal goal. With the constitutional amendment passing, I think my dream's going to come true."

Only some of the providers who'd logged on that morning were from New Mexico, but nearly everyone cheered. Tuesday's victory wasn't just a win for New Mexico, many said. It was a road map.

Historically, the United States has invested [fewer public dollars](#) in early-childhood care relative to gross domestic product than almost any developed country, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. That has left child-care workers with some of the country's lowest wages. As Natachu finished speaking, providers from Minnesota, Ohio and California said they felt energized. New Mexico had [long been ranked](#) one of the country's worst for child well-being, and activists there had faced a decade of opposition. If they could turn it around, couldn't anyone?

## [She crossed New Mexico on a mission: Transform the child-care industry](#)

Lorella Praeli, a New Yorker who co-runs the nonprofit organization Community Change in Action, also spoke on the Zoom call.

“Now,” she said, “the question in these moments is, how does this happen?”

Child-care advocates in New Mexico have tried for more than a decade to secure this money. The fight began in 2011, when a group called [New Mexico Voices for Children](#) proposed tapping into the state’s Land Grant Permanent Fund to pay for early child care and education programs. The state already uses the century-old reserve to help pay for its public school programs, but that initial proposition didn’t make it onto the ballot.

In fact, one advocate explained on the Zoom call, activists tried every year to tap into the reserve, but a group of state lawmakers kept blocking the proposed constitutional amendment from making it out of a state rules committee. Finally, a coalition of nonprofit groups decided to focus its energy on electing new, child-care-friendly candidates. In 2020, those candidates defeated four of the five lawmakers who’d blocked the amendment. The next year, the amendment made it out of committee. The [votes were far from unanimous](#), but both the House and Senate agreed to put the amendment on the ballot so voters could decide.

The legislative win was just the first step, advocates explained during the Zoom call. After the session ended last year, a group of working-class Latinas, most of them parents or providers who volunteer for Olé, spent their free time contacting voters. They knocked on 30,853 doors, made 83,400 phone calls and texted an additional 70,972 people. Most of those voters were, like the activists themselves, Latino, Indigenous or first-time voters.

Merline Gallegos, a Las Cruces-based family child-care provider who

traveled the state to talk to voters, said she'd found that many understood why it needed to pass. The median income in New Mexico is just \$51,243, and many parents could not afford child care before Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham (D) used pandemic relief to offer [free child care for a year](#) to most families.

"But we had many negative things," Gallegos said in Spanish. "Many people are against early childhood."

Before the election, at least one long-term senator had said child care is "way overfunded," and Mark Ronchetti, the Republican candidate for governor, opposed the constitutional amendment. But Lujan Grisham won reelection Tuesday night, and in her [acceptance speech](#) she vowed to make child care free for every New Mexican.

### [In Texas, child-care providers are returning to a broken system](#)

"I can go back to those families and tell them they're not going to have to worry anymore," Gallegos told the Zoom participants. "It's going to make history around the country because child care is a worldwide issue. Everyone is going through this crisis."

As Gallegos spoke, providers nodded and raised their fists in victory. Advocates from California vowed to charter buses to their capitol next session. [Karin Swenson](#), a child-care center director from Minnesota, said she was celebrating as if she herself had won.

"We've been living in a state where our Senate has not let us move forward with anything in terms of early childhood, so it's really cool to see what you've been doing," Swenson said. "We've been following you in New Mexico and we can see now that it's possible for us to do that also."